

REVOLUTIONARY DREAMS

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The Artists Room 1874, oil on canvas Charles Bague

by Rhian Addison



Little is known of Charles Bague as he left no paper trail to follow his career. Bague's work is typical of the flamboyant revival of Rococo fashions from the eighteenth century. The majority of his paintings, of which only seventeen are known to be completed, are based on the female form and the use of the female as an artist's model. He is most famous for his course on classical life drawing preparing artists for the Salon. Having studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme, he developed as a skilled lithographer winning medals at the Salons of 1867 and 1868.

The Artists' Model seems impressionistic but is most likely to be a sketch for a larger piece due to the meticulous accuracy of Bague's completed works. The supposed final piece, *The Opinion of the Model*, is now lost. *The Artist's Model* depicts a young woman leaning over the artist to inspect the painting. She retains her modesty by wrapping a mantle around her, which is most likely to be the same mantle used in his other works. Due to multiple versions of this narrative, many of which are untitled, Bague's works can be easily confused as he prepared many of his subjects according to the most appropriate composition and colour. To capture the decadence of the leisure practices of the *ancien régime*, Bague has emphasised the frame and dress of the period. The fashion of dandyism allowed the justification of social superiority based on wealth, rather than on title or birth. This is seen in how the seated artist's hair is drawn into a pigtail, laced cuffs and rich material.

The only discernable piece of furniture is the chair, which arguably is not in a Rococo fashion, however could possibly be the same chair depicted in the other paintings that has been simplified for the sketch. From what is known of the final piece, *The Opinion of the Model*, the female is holding a Japanese fan. The frame is Rococo, however it is unusual that the artist is painting with the canvas already framed. This could allow for the artist to place finishing touches for his patrons, however the model would not need to be present at this stage, emphasising a whimsical element typical of Rococo imagery. The only other notable presence of Barge representing a frame in the foreground is in the incomplete sketch of the naked model.

It is notable that the mantle in this painting shows more skin than the final images in the series. Nudity was deemed inappropriate as female models were banned from the studio of the French Academy during the eighteenth century (Lathers, pp. 3-4). By the nineteenth century art had become a commodity, thus modelling became a profession. Due to being 'morally suspect' a stigma grew for female models forcing them to pose for private *ateliers*. Women regained modesty when not posing out of fear of being seen by people who were not artists, in this case the viewer of the painting contributes to its voyeuristic nature (Waller, p. 20-44). Consequently the model could be seen as naked when not posing, rather than nude, which was erotic by nineteenth-century standards. Barge's voyeuristic composition suggests a more eroticised and pleasurable side to the Rococo fashion.



Charles Barge, *The Artist's Model*, oil on board, 23.6 x 16.4 cm, Bequest; Margaret Davies, 1963 (NMW A 2425)

The intention of *The Artist's Model* may have been as a compositional sketch but alternatively serves as a small scale 'cabinet' picture designed to 'titillate' rather than created as a final piece (Duncan, pp. 10-11). Although this may not be the paintings intended purpose it echoes the common Rococo theme of pleasure and indiscretion. Barge's audience becomes the voyeur as the it is made to feel as if they have stumbled onto a scene that is not always wholly socially appropriate. It has been suggested that erotic genre painting may have implied the consequences of immorality within society, which insinuates that Barge and his contemporaries may have painted with erotic undertones, or were commissioned to do so.

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